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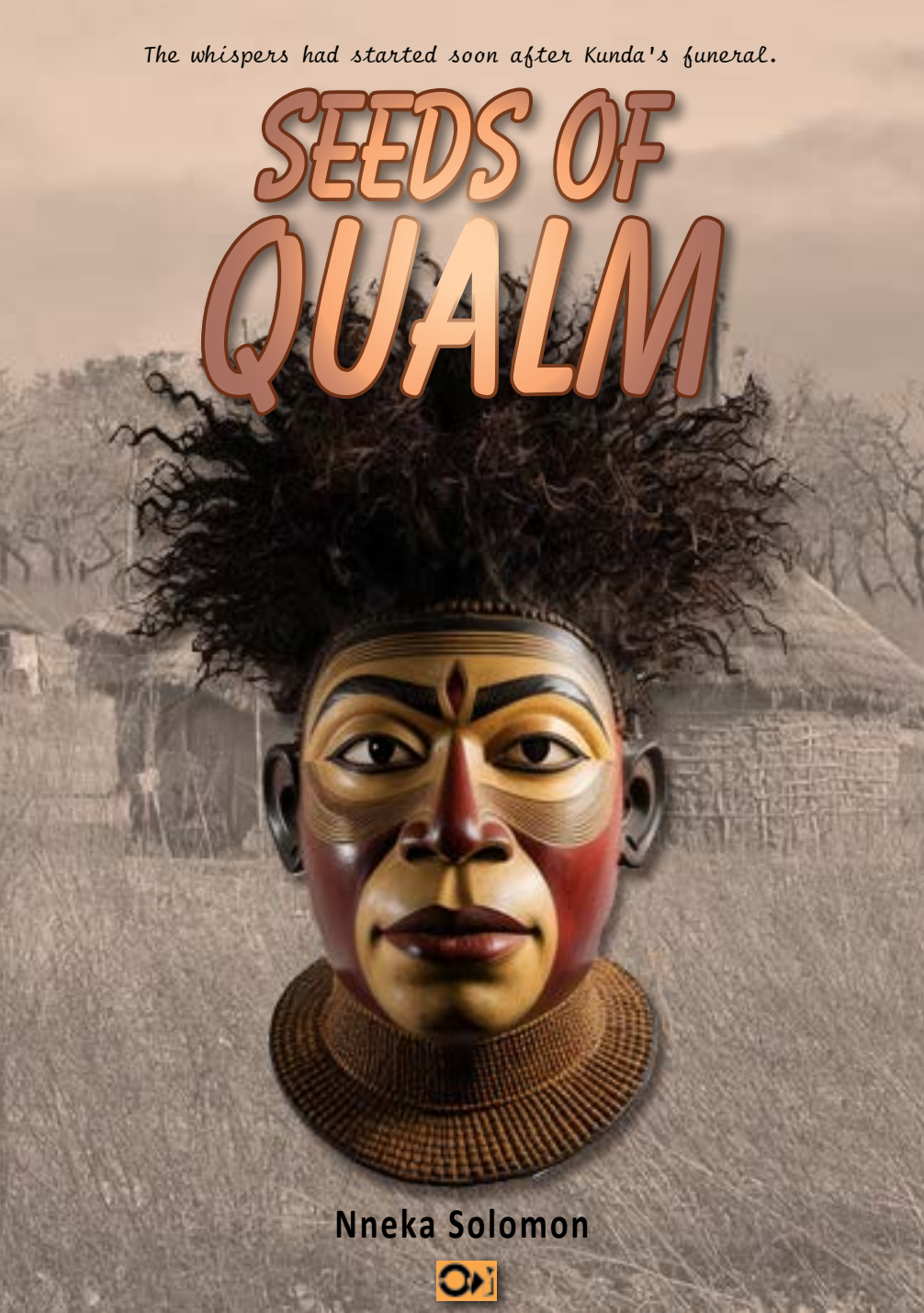
# SEEDS OF QUALM



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Nneka Solomon

# Seeds of Qualm

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The sun, heavy and red like a burnished coin, hung low over the village of Mzimba. It was late afternoon, and the air shimmered with the heat that only a Malawian summer could bring. Dust rose in small clouds, dancing in the restless wind, curling around the cracked walls of the houses that lined the dirt roads. The village was a sleepy thing in the heat, yet underneath its languid surface, something more insidious was stirring. Tension hung thick as the scent of rain, something only the wise could feel, though none spoke of it yet.

In the farthest corner of the village, past the crowded market stalls and the shanties of tin and straw, sat the house of Grace Nyirenda. Once, it had been the pride of Mzimba, two rooms wide, with a porch where Grace's husband, Kunda, would sit and speak to the villagers in a voice deep as thunder, dispensing

advice and generosity in equal measure. Kunda, the wealthiest man in the village, had been a figure to be revered, and his wife, Grace, had borne the weight of his status with an unshakable dignity. They had lived together, side by side, a queen and her king in the small but proud kingdom of Mzimba.

But Kunda was dead now. And where there had once been peace, there was only murmur.

Grace stood at the edge of her compound, her gaze sweeping over the maize fields that swayed in the afternoon breeze. The green stalks, full and ripe, gave an illusion of life and prosperity—but they did not fool her. Beneath them, there was rot. She could feel it in her bones, just as she could feel the weight of every gaze that fell on her.

The whispers had started soon after Kunda's funeral. They came soft at first, like a breeze moving through the village, too soft to be heard by anyone who was not listening closely. But once they began, there was no stopping them. And once the words were spoken, they could never be unspoken.

It was said that her son, Thando, was not Kunda's child. That the boy who had grown tall, proud, and strong in Kunda's house, had not been born of his

blood. The village had its own theories, some said it was the son of the wandering teacher who had come to Mzimba one rainy season, a man with eyes like the night sky, whose presence left a ripple of uncertainty in his wake. Others pointed to a younger farmer, a man with an unquenchable smile, who had worked the land beside Grace when Kunda had fallen ill.

At first, Grace laughed off the rumours, as any woman with pride would. But as the gossip spread, so did the unease in her chest. There was something about it, something in the way people whispered when they thought she could not hear. She caught it in the flickers of eyes, the sideward glances, the too-loud coughs when she passed by.

Thando, once a boy of laughter, now wore the heavy cloak of suspicion. He felt it too. She saw the way he avoided the villagers, the way his shoulders hunched when he passed near the elders, as if he could feel their judgment pressing down on him. He was still her son. Her blood. But there was something about the way the village saw him now that made Grace's chest tighten with the weight of her silence.

They said nothing to her face, of course. The village had too much respect for Grace to speak directly of what was being said behind her back. They were kind

in their cruelty, and cruel in their kindness. They would wait. The truth, they whispered, was always in the soil. And the soil, as it turned out, had no mercy.

One evening, as the sun sank behind the hills and the shadows stretched long over the village, a fire was set near Grace's compound. A man came to her doorstep, his eyes darting nervously.

"A word with you, Mama Grace," he said, his voice tight, his hand trembling as he held out a piece of paper, an old receipt folded in half. He had been an acquaintance of Kunda's, a friend of the family.

Grace took the paper, her fingers brushing against his, and her heart skipped.

"It's for Thando," the man said. "The boy... you need to know. There's a man. They say he... he's the one."

He was not speaking plainly, but she understood. She had understood for months now. She folded the paper slowly and turned, her back to him. The man hesitated, then left. His retreat was marked by the crackle of the fire at his back, the sound of gossip igniting.

That night, Grace went to find Thando.

The boy was near the riverbank, his face unreadable as he stared into the water.

"Thando," she called softly, but the boy did not turn. Instead, he spoke without facing her.

"Mama, they are talking about me."

She wanted to reach for him, to tell him that the village was wrong, that they were all wrong, but the truth felt like something that had been stolen from her long ago. The rumours, the lies, they had planted themselves too deeply.

"The village is wrong," she said, her voice steady despite the knot in her chest.

Thando turned then, and for the first time, Grace saw the uncertainty in his eyes. "Are they?"

Before she could answer, a shout broke the silence. A voice rang out from across the river.

"Grace! Thando!" It was the elder, Olenga. The village was gathering.

"What is it?" Grace shouted back, her voice filled with a cold sharpness she hadn't known she had in her.

"They've found him," Olenga said. "Kunda's cousin, the one they said disappeared all those years ago... he's here. And the boy... Thando..."

Grace froze.

The seed of doubt, long planted, had begun to take root.

* * * * *

The village had never been quiet before, but it was about to be. Grace's world, once built on unshakable pride, was now tumbling towards a truth she could never have anticipated. And it was a truth that would burn hotter than any fire, spreading faster than any rumour, tearing through the fabric of Mzimba like a storm.

But there was a twist yet to come. The truth, when it arrived, would not be the one anyone had been expecting. And when it was revealed, it would change everything. Forever.

# I.

Grace woke to the frantic sound of voices drifting through the cracks in the mud walls of her hut. It was the shrill urgency of fear, something she had come to dread, something that filled her chest with dread before she even opened her eyes. The sun was just beginning to rise, its golden light creeping through the thatched roof, casting long shadows across the floor where dust particles swirled in the cool morning air. The village was waking up, always a busy time, but today, the sounds were off. They carried a weight, a heaviness, that made the morning feel more like a burden than a new beginning.

"Thando! Thando!" The shout sliced through the air again, more frantic this time, a cry that twisted her heart. It was the kind of cry no mother should ever hear, and it broke through the stillness like a thunderclap.

Her heart leaped. *Thando.* Grace's breath caught in her throat. She scrambled out of bed, her bare feet hitting the cold dirt floor as she rushed to the door. Her legs felt like lead, but she could not ignore the pull of the world outside, where something had gone terribly wrong.

She stepped outside, and the world before her seemed suspended in a blur of confusion and dread. The morning sky, a washed-out blue, hung above the village like a blanket too tight, as though it too was stifling in anticipation of what was unfolding below.

The voices grew louder as she reached the center of the village, a gathering of people forming around her son. Grace's heart pounded as she pushed her way through the crowd, her breath coming in sharp bursts. When she reached the center, she saw her son.

Thando's body lay limp on the ground, his limbs twisted unnaturally, his pale face frozen in an expression of shock. His eyes stared blankly into the sky, his mouth slightly ajar as though he had been trying to speak in his final moments but had been silenced too quickly.

There was no blood. No wound. No obvious sign of violence. Yet, the way he had fallen like a puppet

whose strings had been severed, spoke of something darker, something sinister.

Grace dropped to her knees beside him, her breath shallow, her hands trembling as they hovered over his body. "Thando," she whispered, but the word felt empty in the air, lost amidst the confusion of the crowd.

The village elder, Olenga, stood nearby, his face a mask of sorrow. He had always been a steady presence in Grace's life, a man whose voice carried weight and whose opinions commanded respect. But now, he looked as though the earth itself had buckled beneath him. He could not meet her eyes, his gaze fixed on her son's lifeless form.

"Was it the illness?" Grace asked, her voice thick with fear. The village had been plagued with illness before, fevers and coughing fits that had stolen lives too quickly, too mercilessly. But this… this was different. This was not an illness she recognized.

"No," Olenga replied, his voice low and sorrowful. "It was not the illness. It was... something else."

The words landed like a blow, sharp and final. Grace's mind raced. *Something else.* The villagers had

been whispering about Thando for months, rumours about his parentage, the stories of his supposed father not being Kunda, but someone else. She had tried to ignore them, tried to live her life in spite of the poison they spread, but now, standing over her son's lifeless body, those whispers felt real. *What had they done to him?*

The elder continued, his voice hoarse with the weight of his own suspicion. "Grace, it's said that Thando was poisoned. And from the looks of it, not a natural poison. This is darker, a curse maybe... or something worse."

Grace's stomach turned. *Poison.* Her mind reeled. Who could have done this to her son? Who would want to harm him? There were no answers, only more questions, and the answers seemed to be tied to the same rumours that had been slowly suffocating her.

A murmur spread through the crowd as the weight of the elder's words sank in. Some looked at Grace with pity, others with suspicion, and Grace could feel it in the air, like a stifling heat that threatened to choke her. The whispers had become louder, and they were no longer just about her son's bloodline. Now they were about his death.

"Who would do this to him?" Grace muttered to herself, more to the wind than to anyone in particular. She knew the answer, or at least a part of it. It was the village. It was their cruelty wrapped in the guise of concern. It was the rumours that had poisoned their hearts long before this day.

One of the women, a gossip Grace had known since childhood, sidled up to her. "They say... they say it's the boy's father's curse. That Kunda's bloodline could never be clean, that it was always meant to be tainted. Maybe that's why Thando was never truly accepted here."

Grace turned sharply to face her. "Do not speak of my son like that," she warned, her voice rising, breaking through the thick air of suspicion. "Thando was a good boy. He was my son. And he died because of the evil you people have planted in this village."

The woman stepped back, her eyes wide with fear, as the crowd parted, murmuring under their breath. Grace stood taller than she ever had, her shoulders squared against the weight of their judgment. But inside, her heart twisted like a knife.

There was a sharp voice from the crowd, a voice that cut through the tension like a blade.

“It wasn’t the poison,” a man called out. His name was Zikomo, a former friend of Kunda, though their friendship had soured over the years. “I know this. I can smell it on him. The boy... he was cursed long before his death. The spirits, they’ve come for him.”

Grace’s blood ran cold. Curses. Spirits. It was the old talk, the one the elders had used to explain the things they could not understand. She could feel her stomach churn with anger, but the truth was, she didn’t know. Not yet. The truth had been buried long ago, and now, it was coming back to haunt them all.

“I’ve seen it before,” Zikomo continued, his voice growing louder. “People like him, born from lies. Born from things they weren’t meant to be. The boy was never Kunda’s. That’s the curse.”

Grace wanted to scream at him, to rip those words from his mouth, but she couldn’t. Not here, not now. Not with so many eyes watching, waiting for her to break. Her hands clenched into fists, the urge to lash out building inside her.

Before she could respond, Olenga raised a hand. “Enough,” he said, his voice ringing through the crowd. “This is not the time for accusations.”

But Grace could feel it. The poison had spread far beyond the village square, and it was coursing through the veins of this place like a sickness. The truth, whatever it was, would come. And when it did, it would tear Mzimba apart.

* * * * *

The villagers slowly dispersed, leaving Grace standing over her son's body. She felt the weight of their gazes, some pitying, some accusatory, but all heavy with suspicion. The truth had a way of unravelling things, and Grace was determined to uncover it, even if it meant burning everything to the ground in the process.

She bent down, her fingers brushing against Thando's cold hand, and whispered a prayer. For him. For herself. For the village that had once been her home.

And then, as the sun climbed higher in the sky, Grace made a vow. The rumours would not win. She would find out who had done this, and she would make them pay. No matter the cost.

## II.

The funeral was a strange affair, as funerals often are when the dead are more than just bodies—when they are riddled with unanswered questions and cloaked in the fog of untold stories. The mourners, dressed in their best clothes, mostly second-hand, stained with the promise of hope that had long since withered, stood in silence around the freshly dug grave. The earth was red, rich with the blood of the land, and yet it felt colder than it should have, as if the very soil itself had decided to turn away from what had happened.

Grace stood beside the grave, her face a mask of grief, though her mind was far from the rituals of the moment. She had been part of these ceremonies before had watched the older women of the village sway in rhythm with the death chants, their voices rising like the wind, sending prayers to ancestors who would never answer. But today, her eyes were

fixed not on the grave but on the crowd. They were too quiet. Too still.

Her son, Thando, had been a good boy, had been her light. But the dark thoughts that filled her mind now, thoughts she had tried to push away for so long suddenly felt as if they were bleeding into the very earth beneath her feet. The whispers that had followed Thando his entire life, the ones that told of his true parentage, of a father whose name was never spoken aloud, were no longer distant rumours. They had turned into something more dangerous—something more tangible. Something that had taken her son away from her.

The village elders murmured their condolences in a language she didn't hear. Their words were like heavy stones, sinking into the ground, sinking into her heart. There were too many questions. Too many eyes. And too many secrets that no one was willing to face.

Grace could feel them on her now, the eyes that watched her every move, the silent judgment, the way they looked at her as if she were a stranger. But then, as if the earth itself had opened to swallow the silence, a figure emerged from the edges of the crowd. He was tall, his posture rigid as if held togeth-

er by secrets too heavy to bear. His suit was torn at the seams, his shoes worn thin from years of walking through shadows. He had the look of a man who had been somewhere else and had returned, only to find that everything he had left behind had been broken in his absence.

Grace knew him immediately, though she had not seen him in years. His name was not spoken aloud, either. The village had a way of burying names, like they buried the dead. But everyone knew him. He had been following her since her husband's death, appearing at odd moments, lurking just beyond the edge of her vision like a shadow that refused to leave.

His eyes met hers from across the grave, and she felt a shiver crawl up her spine. He walked towards her, his footsteps slow but deliberate, the sound of his shoes crunching against the gravel echoing in the sudden stillness of the funeral. When he reached her, he stopped and studied her face, his gaze unnervingly calm, as if he had seen too much of the world to be moved by anything now.

"Grace," he said, his voice low, but somehow it felt like it reverberated against the silence of the world. "I believe you've been living a lie for too long."

Her heart pounded in her chest. His words hit her like a slap in the face, sharp and sudden. She clenched her fists, the dirt from the grave sticking to her palms. "What do you mean?" Her voice came out a whisper, strained, as though she feared even the wind could carry his words away.

He took a step closer, his eyes scanning the crowd as if ensuring no one was listening too closely. His presence seemed to force the air around them to grow heavier, darker. "The truth about your son's father," he continued, his words dripping with a slow, painful kind of malice, "it's not what you think."

Grace stiffened. Her pulse quickened, a surge of cold terror spreading through her veins. *Not what I think?* She had always believed that Thando's father was a man from the village—Kunda, who had loved her once, before fate had pulled them apart. But now… now this man was telling her it was all a lie.

She shook her head, trying to push the thoughts away. *No. This is not how it happened. Thando was mine. He was my son.*

"I don't understand," she managed, her voice breaking the silence around them like a crack in glass.

The man's lips twitched, a ghost of a smile that held no warmth. "There's more to Thando than anyone knows," he said, his words curling like smoke in the air. "And the reason he died... it's tied to a secret someone wanted to bury."

Grace felt her chest tighten as if the air itself was being sucked out of her lungs. *A secret?* What secret? Her mind spun with confusion, with fragments of memories and thoughts that didn't quite add up. Thando had been strong, healthy. He had no enemies. He had loved his life. He had loved the village. What secret could there have been?

She turned to him, her eyes wild with disbelief. "You're saying that someone killed my son... because of his father's secret?" Her voice trembled, each word coming out as a desperate plea for him to take it back, for him to say it wasn't true.

The man nodded, his face an unreadable mask. "And that someone..." He paused, letting the silence stretch between them like a chasm. "Is closer to you than you think."

Her heart stopped. The words echoed in her ears, but they made no sense. *Closer to me than I think?* Her hands trembled. Who could he mean? The village? Her friends? Her family?

No. It couldn't be.

She turned on him, desperation rising within her. "Who? Who is it? Who would do such a thing to him?" Her voice had risen now, trembling with the fear that had been lying dormant beneath her skin for far too long.

The man's eyes softened, just a little, as if pitying her ignorance. "I think you know, Grace," he said quietly. "I think you know exactly who I'm talking about."

A cold chill ran down her spine. She felt as if the ground had tilted beneath her, and the world had become a dark place filled with ghosts, with echoes of lies she had told herself for years. The shadows that had once seemed innocent now looked sinister.

And then, just as quickly as he had appeared, the man turned, melting into the crowd with the same eerie silence that had followed him in. Grace stood frozen, her breath shallow, her chest tight, as the village resumed its hushed whispers, the earth still pressing down on her, unyielding, cold.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The words spun around her, blurring into a haze of confusion and dread. *Closer than I think.*

No. She would not let this man break her. She would not let him tear her family apart.

But as she turned to leave the grave, the distant sound of footsteps behind her made her pause. The weight of the unknown pressed down harder now. The pieces of the puzzle were shifting, falling into place, but there were too many pieces missing, too many gaps.

Who was this man, and what did he know?

And who, in this village of silence and shadows, had killed her son?

* * * * *

The villagers gathered around her as she walked away from the grave, their murmurs falling on deaf ears. Grace had no patience for their words now. Her mind raced, secrets, whispers, lies. They were all part of the same dark story, and she could feel it tightening its grip on her.

As the crowd thinned, Grace looked back once more, her eyes scanning the faces of the people who had known her since she was a child, who had known Thando since his first breath.

One face caught her attention, Kunda's. The man who had once been the love of her life. He stood at the edge of the group, his eyes locked on hers, an unreadable expression on his face.

Grace didn't know why, but in that moment, she felt the chill of his gaze pierce her heart. *Closer than I think.* The words repeated in her head.

It was him. It had always been him.

## III.

The days after Thando's funeral were heavy with grief, the air thick with the weight of loss. But grief is like a shadow that stretches and shrinks depending on the time of day, and for Grace, the shadow of Thando's death had only grown longer. The ache in her chest was a constant companion, a reminder that something had been torn from her, but there was no way to stitch the pieces back together.

Her house, once filled with the sounds of Thando's laughter and the clink of plates at dinner, was now eerily quiet. It seemed that the village, too, was holding its breath. The gossip had slowed to a crawl, but Grace could feel its presence, lurking beneath the surface, creeping into every conversation.

It was on the third morning after the funeral when a small, scrawny boy came to her door. His clothes were torn, and his feet were bare, dirt crusted along the soles. He held out a crumpled piece of paper, his face nervous but resolute.

Grace took the letter from his hand, her fingers brushing against his calloused skin. The boy was gone before she could ask him where he'd come from, leaving her with nothing but the note, which she unfolded with trembling hands.

It was written in a hurried, almost frantic hand. The words blurred at first, as if the ink had been rushed in some violent haste.

"Grace, Thando was not your son. He was Kunda's son, but he was not your Kunda's. He is the son of someone else, someone you know very well. The truth was buried for a reason. Do not trust anyone, not even yourself. The past is coming back to claim what is rightfully theirs. Beware the one who claims to be your ally, for they are the serpent in the grass."

Grace read the letter over and over, each word a hammer, pounding her chest, leaving a hole that she couldn't fill. Her mind spun with confusion and fear. *Not your Kunda's?* The words echoed in her ears, drowning out everything else.

Her heart raced. It was as if the earth itself had cracked open beneath her feet. She thought she knew the truth. Thando was the son of Kunda, her late husband. They had shared a life—a life filled with struggles and dreams, but always together. How could it be anything else?

But the letter had no answers, only more questions. *Who could it be? Who else did I know well enough for this to be possible?*

And then there was the man, the man who had appeared at the funeral, the one who had whispered of secrets and lies. She had thought him an enemy, an opportunist, but now his words were starting to take shape in her mind.

Grace stood there in the middle of her house, holding the letter, her mind racing. The letter had come with no return address, no signature. There was no clue as to who had sent it, but the message was clear: Thando's death was only the beginning.

The inheritance. Thando's true parentage. Her husband's mysterious wealth. All these threads, once separate, were now tied together, creating a net that closed around her.

The door creaked open behind her, and she turned to find the man—the one who had appeared at the funeral. He was standing in the doorway, his presence filling the room like a shadow. His dark eyes were fixed on her, unreadable, and the faintest of smirks tugged at the corners of his lips.

"I see you've received the letter," he said, his voice smooth, almost too calm for the tension in the air.

Grace's fingers clenched around the paper, her knuckles white. "What is this? What do you want from me?" Her voice trembled with a mixture of fear and anger.

The man stepped inside without waiting for an invitation. His shoes scuffed against the dirt floor, and he crossed the room with the confidence of someone who owned the space. He paused in front of her, his gaze lingering on the letter in her hand.

"You don't understand, Grace," he said, his voice soft but cutting. "Thando's death isn't a coincidence. It's the result of a plan that's been in motion for years. A plan that involves you and your family, your inheritance, and the truth about your son. I've been watching you, waiting for the right moment. And now that the moment has come, I'm here to make sure that you don't ruin everything."

Grace's heart pounded in her chest. "You think I don't know what you're after? You think I'm some fool to be manipulated by your lies?"

The man smiled, a cold, almost amused expression. "You're not a fool, Grace. You're simply a woman caught in a web you didn't know was being spun around you."

She stepped forward, her eyes burning with defiance. "I will never let you take what's mine. I will never let you destroy my family, my son's legacy."

His smile faltered for a moment, his eyes narrowing. "Your son's legacy is a lie, Grace. And you..." He pointed a finger at her, his voice rising. "You've been living in it for far too long."

Grace took a deep breath, the weight of his words pressing down on her like an anvil. *A lie?* Could it be true? Could everything she had known about her family be false?

"You have no idea what you're dealing with," the man continued, stepping closer to her, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "Thando's true father, he's the key to everything. And if you don't give me what I want, I'll make sure the truth comes out, and it will ruin you."

"Who is it?" Grace demanded, her voice rising in frustration. "Who is Thando's father? Tell me the truth!"

The man took another step forward, his face inches from hers. For a moment, the air between them seemed to crackle with tension, the room suffocating with unspoken threats.

"The truth is simple, Grace," he said, his voice cold as ice. "Thando's father is someone you've known your entire life. Someone you trusted. Someone who is still hiding in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike. And when that moment comes... it will change everything."

Grace felt a cold shiver run down her spine. She knew who he meant, and yet she couldn't bring herself to say it. *Kunda? No. It couldn't be.*

The man seemed to sense her hesitation. "You'll figure it out eventually," he said, his voice turning into a low growl. "But by then, it might be too late."

Grace's eyes narrowed. "What do you want from me? You came here with your lies, your threats, but what is it you really want?"

The man's smile returned, his eyes glinting with

something dark, something that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “I want the inheritance, Grace. But more than that, I want the truth. The truth that will destroy you and everyone you love. And I’ll make sure it all comes to light, whether you’re ready or not.”

He turned to leave, his footsteps echoing in the silence of the room. Grace stood there, her heart racing, her mind spinning. She had never felt so lost, so utterly trapped in a web of lies and betrayal.

As the door slammed shut behind him, Grace collapsed to her knees, the letter still clutched in her hand. The world felt like it was spinning out of control, like the very ground beneath her feet was giving way. But one thing was clear: the truth was coming, and it was more dangerous than she had ever imagined.

## IV.

Grace sat motionless on the cold floor of her house, her body drained, yet unable to move. The world around her had fallen into a strange, suffocating silence, as if the earth itself was holding its breath, waiting for the inevitable. The weight of the letter crushed her chest, and the walls seemed to close in with every passing second.

Her thoughts, once sharp, had become frayed, scattered like leaves in the wind. She tried to focus, tried to make sense of the words, but they blurred together, twisting into something far darker than she had imagined.

*Thando's father is someone you've known your entire life.*

She couldn't breathe. Who? Who was it?

A shadow flickered across her mind, Kunda, her late husband. She had loved him, had known him better than anyone, and yet now the very foundation of that love felt like shifting sand beneath her feet. But that couldn't be it. Could it?

The house seemed to echo with a faint hum, a quiet thrum that matched the pounding of her heart. Her breath came in shallow gasps, each inhalation heavier than the last, as if the air had turned to stone.

The evening light filtered through the small window, casting long, slanted shadows across the room. The world outside had begun to cool, the colours of the sunset slipping from red to purple as dusk settled over the village. Grace felt the hours stretching, elongating, as though time had become a river, its currents moving slower and slower.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway, his figure dark against the waning light. She hadn't heard him approach, but there he was, as though summoned by the weight of her thoughts.

"I knew you'd be here." Grace's voice was a whisper, weak, but steady with the knowledge that this moment was inevitable.

The man stepped into the room, his eyes fixed on her, but his face remained obscured in the shadows. He didn't speak at first, only watched her with an intensity that made the hairs on the back of her neck rise.

The silence between them stretched, a tension so thick it was almost palpable, suffocating the air.

"Why now?" Grace's voice cracked as she finally broke the silence. Her eyes never left him, but her heart hammered in her chest, the pulse loud in her ears. "Why this? Why us?"

The man took another step forward, the weight of his presence pressing down on her like a stone. His voice was low, but there was something in it that sent a tremor through her, something cold and calculating. "Because the truth can no longer remain hidden. It will come to light, no matter how much you try to stop it."

Grace's hands clenched around the letter, her knuckles white, but she didn't stand. She couldn't bring herself to. The world was spinning, and the ground beneath her was no longer steady.

"You said you wanted the truth," she said, her voice

barely above a whisper, the words tasting bitter on her tongue. "But the truth is something you can't take. It's mine. You can't claim it."

The man smiled, a faint curve of his lips that held no warmth. "You think you can stop this?" he asked, his tone laced with mockery. "The truth isn't yours to hold onto, Grace. It's already slipping away from you."

Grace's breath hitched. *Slipping away*. The words haunted her, and she could feel her mind unravelling, threads coming loose, connections breaking.

The man's footsteps grew closer, his shadow engulfing hers. She felt small under his gaze, smaller than she had ever felt before, as if the weight of everything she had once known was pressing down on her all at once.

"You don't know what you're dealing with," she whispered, more to herself than to him. "You don't know what the truth will do to all of us. It will tear this village apart."

The man paused, just for a moment, before he spoke again. "And that is exactly what must happen." His voice was soft, almost gentle, but his words were

like shards of glass, cutting deep. “What do you think this village is, Grace? A place for secrets? No. It’s a place for the truth to rise. You think you’re the only one who has been hiding, who has been living in a lie? You’re wrong.”

The air in the room seemed to freeze, the temperature dropping suddenly, as though the night had seeped in with the man’s words. Grace felt a chill in her bones, the terror of his words sinking into her very marrow.

“You’re wrong,” she whispered again, but this time, it sounded like a plea. She clutched the letter to her chest as if it were her last defence, the only thing that connected her to the reality she had once known.

And then, before she could react, the door slammed open with such force that the wood creaked on its hinges. A figure stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the fading light. A man, but not the one she had been speaking to. This one was different, older, more weathered. His eyes locked with hers, and for a moment, time itself seemed to stop.

He stepped inside, his movements deliberate, each step measured. But it was the look in his eyes that made her heart skip a beat, familiar, yet full of something that made her skin crawl.

"You," she whispered, her breath catching. The realization hit her with the force of a physical blow. This man, this was the one from her past. The one whose name had been buried for so long, forgotten in the shadows of her life.

Her heart stuttered in her chest as he took another step forward. *He* was the one who had been pulling the strings all along. He had never left.

The man in the doorway, her husband's brother, smiled, but it wasn't a smile of joy. It was the smile of someone who had watched the world unravel from the sidelines, content to let it burn.

"The truth, Grace," he said, his voice low, almost a purr. "You're right. It has come to light. But you won't like it when you see it fully."

Before Grace could react, a noise like thunder cracked through the air. The floor beneath her trembled, and a sudden burst of light flooded the room. She blinked, her eyes stinging, but when the light receded, the man was gone. The room was empty again.

And just as quickly as the terror had descended upon her, it was gone.

But the final whisper in the back of her mind remained.

*The truth is only the beginning.*

She closed her eyes, clutching the letter to her chest as the sounds of the village outside faded away into the night.

It was too late to go back. The game had already started. And the stakes had never been higher.

**END**

**Seeds of Qualm**

**Nneka Solomon**

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*The whispers had started soon after Kunda's funeral.*

# SEEDS OF QUALM

**Nneka Solomon**, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

**Nneka Solomon**